

Dibaajimowin 1: Safe Space

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August 15, 2011

<http://dibaajimowin.wordpress.com/space>

Podcast Transcript

Creating spaces for the resurgence Anishinabe-inaadiziwin was a primary and on-going activity throughout my time in Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg territory during the summer of 2011. Such activities took the form of ceremonies (including sweats, and naming ceremonies), land-based activities (including harvesting medicines and materials from the local ecology), as well as facilitating talking circles with youth in classrooms and in workshop settings. In terms of the latter, schools or workshop leaders would invite Gitigaa-Migize to inform their students about Nishnaabeg teachings, which I would attend as his shkaabewis. Each activity was meant to create a safe space in which students - whether Indigenous or non-indigenous - could learn about Nishnaabeg teachings. Helping Gitigaa-Migize facilitate these spaces provided grounds for many conversations about how such spaces can support the resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin, and how such spaces can also become more about educating settlers about what they should be educating themselves about, namely, their role in decolonizing the relationships between Canadians and Anishinabek. Doing this for them felt like a tokenization of Nishnaabeg culture rather than resurgence.

While we facilitated a number of ceremonies, openings and closings and speaking circles, three spaces stand out for their significance in promoting resurgence within a biskaabiiyang framework. Recognizing that it is virtually impossible to create

spaces that are totally safe for Anishinabek,¹ our work was focused on creating Anishinabek space, even when the group of people we were working with were an all-settler group.

The first was a set of meetings we held with a grade 11 class from a local high school. This was a Native Studies class of about 12 students; Gitigaa-Migize was contacted by them to come to their classroom several times to speak about Nishnaabeg traditions, to answer their questions that arose from their studies throughout the year, and to observe their presentations about what they had learned through their curriculum. The students were surprised to learn that Nishnaabeg have always lived in around the Peterborough area, including the fact that Nishnaabeg continue to live there today. This, despite the fact that their school is located on Nishnaabeg land. It was difficult to participate in these meetings because the students displayed what we believed to be racist indoctrinations about Nishnaabeg and Indigenous peoples that come with growing up in colonial Canadian society. The students were not being intentionally racist, evidenced in part by the fact that they were taking a Native Studies course, but the fabric of society which they represented in the classroom (i.e. settler society) manifested myths about Indigenous peoples that are based in racism. For example, one student continuously told Gitigaa-Migize and I that it “sucks” that the government is oppressing us, but that in order to stop this we should fight to get better business loans so that we can work for our money instead of just collecting

¹ Speaking about creating spaces for feminist discourse, Jos Truitt (2009) argues that is actually incredibly difficult to create spaces that are truly safe, as violence and ignorance can easily infiltrate such spaces, sometimes being brought in by persons most devoted to making positive change. Truitt argues that such spaces should be based on accountability instead of safety.

welfare cheques. The deeper dynamics of colonial power were not a part of her analysis.

Our response to this kind of neoconservative racism was to push the students to think about whether liberation is possible for Nishnaabeg so long as these students do not question their own privileges as settlers in a society that criminalizes indigeneity. In other words, we encouraged them to feel accountable to some degree for the ways in which they are benefitting from the oppression of Indigenous peoples in order to begin to undermine that privilege as a necessary step towards decolonization. Some of these discussions did begin to have an effect on the students after meeting with them a total three times over the course of one month. However, our meetings came to an end before we could see the full implications on their thinking.

In early July, we were invited to speak with a group of all-indigenous youth engaging in a three-week theatre training workshop at Trent University. This experience made clear the contrast between working with Indigenous people or settlers interested in true decolonization vs. settlers who are not ready to question their own privileges within colonial Canada. This group of Indigenous youth did not tokenize themselves, Gitigaa-Migize or myself: we were all in the same boat, meaning we were all working from an understanding that living an Indigenous life today brings with it dangers as well as responsibilities to the land and our communities. The nature of our discussions were similar to those we had with the high school students the month previous, but the difference was the theatre students could see themselves in the teachings and stories we shared together.

There was no cultural tourism, evidenced by the fact that when we visited Kinooomaagewaapkong (also known as the Petroglyphs),² about 80 km northeast of Peterborough, Ontario, this group responded to Gitigaa-Migize's teachings by seeking more information about what it means to embody Indigenous knowledge in their every day actions. For example, in a debriefing session held a week after visiting Kinooomaagewaapkong, the students shared their ideas and feelings about the current state of the petroglyphs, and how they could work for the rocks instead of how the rocks could work for them; in short, they put themselves into a relationships and sought ways to take responsibility.

These two experiences provided a strong foundation for a third youth group event Gitigaa-Migize and I took part in. Near the end of July, Gitigaa-Migize asked me to come along as his helper in support of an Indigenous youth leadership development camp, held in Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg territory. This four-day camp focused on encouraging teenaged Indigenous youth to develop their leadership skills, so they could bring those skills back to their communities, which included both urban and rural contexts. I was excited about the opportunity to work with an exclusively Indigenous group, given the positive experience I had working with the theatre group only a couple of weeks previous. Gitigaa-Migize held opening and closing ceremonies, and we engaged the youth in talking circles and what was for many of them their first sweat lodge ceremony. Again, these youth did not tokenize Nishnaabeg culture, but saw themselves in it. By engaging in it, they were taking up something that, for many of them, was a new experience of an old tradition: the

² More information on the Petroglyphs is available at Petroglyphs Provincial Park website, at <http://www.ontarioparks.com/english/petr.html>

ceremonies and talking circles created a safe space for us to be Indigenous or Anishinabe. Gitigaa-Migize, Waaseya'sin (Christine Sy) and I discussed the importance of this: we felt that Indigenous people, and youth in particular, are dealing with two levels of shame as a result of the colonial legacy and on-going neo-colonialism; there is the external shame that comes from being told Indigenous peoples are no good, and then for some there is internal shame that arises from growing up outside of our cultures and languages. Keeping this in mind, our goal was to engage the youth in picking-up pieces of culture as a way to help them find who they are as Indigenous people and to begin putting down the shame that is not theirs to begin with.

Participating in these discussions, we created spaces *for us* instead of creating a space that was safe for settlers to explore their own complex feelings about their relationship with Nishnaabeg. It is clear that safe spaces for Anishinabe resurgence should focus on individuals who will not tokenize our culture, as this only commoditizes Anishinabe-inaadiziwin in an attempt to distill it into something usable within the neoliberal, neocolonial Canadian society *without* addressing the underlying foundations of the oppressive colonial context itself. In other words, safe spaces for resurgence should challenge us to be aware of how Anishinabe-inaadiziwin is tokenized, and then we should take the responsibility to ensure this tokenization is prevented to encourage people to feel safe enough to move into Anishinabe-inaadiziwin.

Analysis: Safe for Who?

One of the ways colonialism is perpetuated in Canada today is by maintaining a society that is not safe for Anishinabek. This includes maintaining control over geographical spaces (e.g. Borrows 2005); narrative spaces (e.g. Denis 1997), and political spaces (e.g. Alfred 2009) in a way that renders such spaces unsafe for us. The point is that Canada does not want to deal with Indigenous Peoples, but rather with an 'Aboriginal' population easily placated within the framework of a 'multicultural nation'. On the other hand, one of the ways that Anishinabek are able to reclaim our spaces in the continuing Canadian colonial context is to create spaces *for ourselves*. Such spaces provide a chance for us to discuss the impacts of colonialism in our own way as well as to start shedding those effects by relearning Anishinabemowin (the Anishinabe language), or learning about Anishinabe-inaadiziwin (way of being),³ Anishinabe-gikendaasowin (our knowledges)⁴ and Anishinabe-izhitwaawin (culture).⁵ These spaces are invaluable as many Anishinabek are now seeking to reconnect with their cultures, communities and families (e.g. Betasamosake 2008a). But do all such spaces automatically promote the resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin, or are they also susceptible to becoming colonized spaces? If so, how can safe spaces for resurgence be protected? These questions drive this short analysis.

It is worthwhile to note that safe space is indeed something that the individuals I worked with during this Community Governance Project want to create. For

³ Geniusz 2009, 9.

⁴ Geniusz 2009, 9.

⁵ Geniusz 2009, 9.

example, much of the conversations I had with Gitigaa-Migize (Doug Williams) within this project revolved around this topic: acutely aware that colonialism has resulted in the current occupation of Nishnaabeg lands, Gitigaa-Migize mentioned on several occasions that what he wants most is to have a piece of land that would support him and his family, not in an agricultural or capitalistic sense, but in the way he grew up. Indeed, he lived off the land as long as he could. However, this became difficult as supplies became more expensive, while at the same time the land was increasingly occupied by settlers in the form of residential development, industrial developments and agriculture. What's more, the land was becoming increasingly polluted as settlers lived their lives according to Western lifestyles. One safe space for Gitigaa-Migize was thus the land, and even though it is increasingly more difficult to access Nishnaabeg lands not compromised by settler occupation and development, he still wants that place in order to live a Nishnaabeg life.

Whereas Gitigaa-Migize tells the story of safe spaces and how he had such spaces taken away from him by settler society, new spaces are emerging where children and adults can connect with Anishinabe-inaadiziwin. Betasamosake (2011) has argued that one of the most important long-term resurgence strategies is to focus on giving our youth the teachings and support they need to grow up as proud and knowledgeable Anishinabek, where children are given the chance to experience what it means to be Anishinabe today without having fears about racism or colonial authority (119-40). This is indeed resulting in the development of Anishinabek youth grounded in a strong sense of Anishinabe self, and was seen through Waaseya'sin's (Christine Sy) words when we spoke about bringing together a

community of Anishinabek and non-Indigenous people around the activities associated with annual maple syrup harvesting at Gitigaa-Migize's house. She notes:

I feel like part of being a parent for me has been teaching my nieces and nephews and my daughter how to live in a colonized world, and still be beautiful and still experience joy, right. To still experience that abandonment that those kids felt in the spring and the winter; that security, that happiness. Those kids, they walk around like they know everything, but it's a humble 'I know everything', and 'I'm confident', and 'I can do this next year'. You know, I see [child's name] talk about, he was talking to us about different plants yesterday, and he did it with such authority, right. But he's confident in himself; he knows what he knows. And the same with [the other children]. That's what's happening here; those kids said 'next year, we're going to be able to do this sugar bush', right.⁶

As Betasamosake (2011) has described it, such spaces provide opportunities to live in the absence of want - whether that want is focused on wanting to feel good as an Anishinabe person, wanting freedom from colonial domination at every turn of life, wanting access to Anishinabe territories, etc.; without want, we get to just *be* (93).

However, despite intentions, it became clear during this project that not all spaces are safe in terms of promoting resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin. While it is safe to say that creating safe spaces does not automatically result in such places actually being safe for oppressed or marginalized peoples (Leonardo and Porter

⁶ Waaseya'sin. Waawshkigaamagki. 17 June 2011.

2010; Truitt 2009), the presence of settlers seeking to experience Indigenous spirituality for their own goals sometimes upset the purpose of the space created during this Community Governance Project. While I do not mean that all settlers attending Anishinabek ceremonies or entering Anishinabek safe spaces undermine the safety or resurgence potential of such spaces, there are settlers who enter such spaces for their own personal/spiritual gain (e.g. Garrouette 2003), often tokenizing Indigenous peoples and Anishinabek in the process (e.g. Deloria 1998). Often, these people are adherents to the "New Age movement," which Garrouette (2003) has defined as "a loose collection of vaguely 'spiritual' groups interested in such diverse subjects as channeling, healing, psychic phenomenon, crystals, goddess worship, and alternative medicine [with] an insatiable interest in all forms of American Indian culture, but especially spiritual and ceremonial practices" (84-5). This is problematic because, as Philip Deloria (1998) has argued, New Age thinking actually displaces Indigenous peoples because settler society conceptualizes Indianness as either something that can be owned by settlers or something that exists beyond the boundaries of settler society (170), ultimately resulting in the commodification of Indigenous peoples and their spiritual traditions (179). Some of the safe spaces we created during this project were undermined occasionally by those who seek to access certain aspects of Anishinabe spirituality or identity without letting go of their personal Eurocentric moorings. This stunted the potential for resurgence because the specter of commoditization and appropriation mirrors the appropriationist, assimilationist and oppressionist tendencies that continue to be exhibited in broader Canadian society. The presence of a few people appropriating Anishinabe-inaadiziwin was enough to drive away some Anishinabek seeking resurgence in what were supposed to be safe spaces.

This raised questions about discernment. Should safe spaces be controlled to limit the undermining potential of the segments of settler society that want Indigenous peoples for their own goals? Is it culturally-appropriate to discern, literally choosing who can and who cannot enter safe spaces? Or is it that discernment today is just another part Anishinabek resurgence that we must do to promote the restrengthening of our nation and communities?

Discernment was a particular topic that arose within my discussions with Gitigaa-Migize, not least of all because there is tension around this topic from an Anishinabe point of view. For example, Gitigaa-Migize was taught to accept everyone. However, this is no longer a safe strategy within an unrelenting colonial context that facilitates the assimilation of Indigenous peoples because, as Gitigaa-Migize noted, some settlers just do not see Anishinabe spirituality for what it really is: some think they know Anishinabek spirituality because it is based on reverence for the Earth, getting this confused with liberal notions of environmentalism or New Ageism.⁷ Nor has open inclusion produced the results that we need for decolonization: instead of supporting Anishinabe youth and adults in learning about and embodying their teachings, some ceremonies and safe spaces we created became a classroom for New Age adherents or settlers not willing to see how their own privilege contributes to oppression of Anishinabek.

Gitigaa-Migize noted that Anishinabe teachings tend to work on Anishinabe, but some do not work on settlers. This applies to the teaching of *aanjigone* - the

⁷ Gitigaa-Migize. Waawshkigaamagki. 15 June 2011.

teaching that says we should not interfere with other people because their actions will be addressed by the spiritual world (Betasamosake 2011, 54); whereas such a teaching would work with Anishinabek, it might not work on settlers because not only do they not have the same connection to land as Anishinabek, but many also retain their non-Anishinabe teachings and spiritualities and force them into our spaces and lands. Discernment arises here as a way to ensure only those people able to contribute to resurgence participate in the spaces we create for resurgence.

Discernment thus emerges as an imperative tool in supporting the resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin within safe spaces. Whereas inclusion is important within Anishinabe social traditions, the reality of colonialism and its effects means that we must be willing to apply our traditions in ways that supports our resurgence and resistance today. The importance of discernment is thus brought to the fore when planning or making safe spaces: Anishinabek have always excluded people from a group when a person's actions risked the group's safety (Borrows 2010, 216-27). And while there are settlers who legitimately seek to support Anishinabe resurgence and resistance, and who might even become Anishinabe through Anishinabe citizenship traditions, there are others that can undermine our resurgence through bringing their own practices into the spaces we create to restrengthen *our* practices (Archie M. qtd. in Garrouette 2003, 92). Part of our resurgence as Anishinabek is to protect our safe spaces, to promote the resurgence we seek.